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Inspiring Hope and Resilience

Why Hope?

How is it possible to talk about inspiring hope when there seems to be so much suffering and despair in the world? How so, when recent economic cutbacks have put so many families in financial crisis, when earthquakes and other natural disasters leave families homeless and children parentless? How is it possible to inspire hope and activate the human capacity for resilience when some of our youth are dropping out of school and some are forgetting who they are and seeking identity in unhealthy activities? I hope that my talk today will make you consider that it is precisely because of these situations that hope is relevant for us to talk about. It is also my hope that you will find room to consider ways to be intentional about inspiring hope in your own and other people's lives.

I want to introduce you to three aspects or qualities of hope that I have learned both in my own life experience, clinical practice and research that reveal why hope is an important life ingredient for all of us to share and practice. These are:

- (1) Hope is intimately linked to our life experiences - Hope exists in experiences of success and adversity
- (2) Hope is nurtured in reciprocal relationships - Hope thrives in community
- (3) The dynamics of hope involve action - Hope is fuels and is fuelled by action.

On Hope

- What is **hope**? According to my mentor, Dr. Ronna Jevne - The ability to envision a future in which you are willing to participate – the **yes** to life
- **Hope as one strength-based personal resource factor has predicted positive psychosocial adjustment for people ranging in age from childhood to adulthood**
- The opposite of hope? Despair and hopelessness – in my line of work this usually means the end – the no to life

- **Resilience** – The ability to bounce back from adversity – like a spring
- **Resilient individuals maintain health and competence, and can even become stronger as a result of challenges such as poverty, neglect, abuse, and disability.**

- Hope and resilience belong to the same family of human strengths – we need them both but I want to suggest that hope underscores the ability to be resilient. I shall then focus on hope for my talk

1. Hope is intimately linked to our life experiences - Hope exists in experiences of success and adversity

Hope researchers, Jevne and Miller write that we hope because it is “**essential to the quality of our life—as essential as is breath to physical existence**” (p. 10).

When we hope, we are able to keep going regardless of what life offers us. With hope, individuals can find meaning, begin to see a future, and cope with losses and other life challenges. Such findings about hope have emerged from **theology, psychology, medical literature, and even philosophical** writings that recognize the dialectic nature of hope - meaning **hope is often experienced in situations of both adversity and success.**

Success – Students with higher hope do better at school; Athletes with higher hope do better in sports

- So if you are a teacher, a coach or a mentor – your biggest tool is to find experiences that that activate a sense of hope in your students, your team and your mentees
- If you are a youth – find out what gives you hope, what are the sources of hope in your life

Adversity – Often it is when we are faced with challenges that *hope makes herself visible*.

“Only when it is dark that we can see the stars” – Martin Luther King Junior

Consider a time in your life when you thought something would never be possible and to your surprise you were wrong? Did we ever think the US would have a black president in our life time? That Mandela would be released from Prison and rise to become SA’s first black president? For some of us closer to home, it is the fact that we are alive today, for others is that we are attending school when we never thought this would be possible. For some parents to live to see you child marry, and for children, to see your parents laugh again etc.

This is what Obama and others such as Cornel West call “The Audacity of Hope” – hope can raise her head and cause change against the odds.

To hope in adversity, in darkness requires courage and faith – that is the ability to live with uncertainty – to keep going when you don’t know – for me this is the most powerful aspect of hope.

Example : Victor Frankl - a Jewish Medical doctor who was a prisoner in Aushwitz wrote about hope in the concentration camps in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning” – those who found something to hope for, to give them meaning, lived longer than those who did not.

Therefore: Hope emerges from various life contexts through personal interpretation and expression, regardless of life circumstances.

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2. Hope is Nurtured in Reciprocal Relationships

Hope has been viewed as a relational process, as something that occurs between people in the context of relationships. Marcel (1962) noted that hope occurs between people when inspired by love.

Miller (1989) observed that hope is threatened when we feel that nobody cares.

Renowned Child Development Specialists, Erickson (1982) postulated that early relational experiences of trust between children and their caregivers develop hope and later influence psychosocial development.

Consider for yourself – when you went through a hard time, who helped you to make it though?

Sometimes it is a person, a hero who you don't know, or a transcendent being – God, Allah

Studies of formed Sudanese and Ugandan boy soldiers found prayer to support them.

The healing power of hope in relationships

Example: Ishamel Bea's "A long way home" – boy soldier from Sierra Leone - Story of Hope Repaired in Relationship

Nurse and health researchers, Farran et al. (1995) observe that the relational attributes of hope are key in enabling people to **"make it" through difficult life experiences** (p. 10).

My study with immigrant and refugee children (Yohani, 2009) expanded this aspect of hope to include the importance of reciprocal relationships. **I help you and you help me – we are in this together**

How then can Adults Nurture Hope in Youth?

Caregivers and people involved in helping professions play an important role in building and maintaining hope, which contributes to an individual's adjustment after life changes

How staff of a psychosocial program for refugee children in my study (Yohani 2004) viewed the role of hope in their work.

First, Staff identified hope as essential to their work and to the lives of the children with whom they worked.

Staff described numerous challenges faced by children and their families that contribute to a child's hope being low or not visible to staff (e.g. parent stress, gaps in education, racism). YET

Hope was often visible to staff in areas where children felt successful and felt supported by adults in their lives.

Staff worked to create experiences that engender hope in children reflected ingredients that helps hope to grow: Patience and Time, Responsive Action; Encouragement; Personal Commitment & Self-Reflection.

3. The dynamics of hope involve action - Hope is fuels and is fuelled by action.

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Hope has been described as a **dynamic, active process in which people remain connected to life through focused activities** (Pruyser 1968) and are **willing to take small steps towards dealing with particular situations or meeting personal goals** (Jevne 1993).

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, that sings the song without words and never stops at all – Emily Dickinson

Hope Helps Initiate Action

This active part of hope has typically been described as a cognitive or rational thought process which includes goal setting and engaging in overt **physical activities** that increase a sense of hope.

Engaging in activities focused on hope over a period of time, will have an impact on the experience of hope – that is hope fuels action and actions in turn increase our hope.

Hope Activates Creativity

Another view of hope as an active force can be seen in the **creative processes associated with hope**. Individuals **who are able to hope, despite past challenges and unknown outcomes, are said to do well in life as they engage in a creative imaginative process that allows them to see beyond boundaries and live without absolutes** (Lynch 1965).

To me this speaks again to the **ability to live with uncertainty which is a hallmark of a hopeful person – yet remain connected to life**

Example - Story of Mandela on Robben Island

In Summary

In summary – hope has a powerful and important role in individual and communities life– our task is to make it more visible by recognizing that:

- 1) Hope is linked to our personal experiences and life contexts
- (2) Hope is nurtured in reciprocal relationships
- (3) Hope is fuels and is fuelled by action.

This strengths-based approach does not imply ignorance of vulnerabilities, but instead broadens our perceptions to include the positive attributes of children. I will end with a quote from Robert Brooks:

Such (*on strengths*) a focus creates an atmosphere in which blame and accusation give way to compassion and understanding, in which all parties (parents, school, neighbourhood and community agencies) are encouraged to work closely together, in which caregivers receive the support and education required to help children, and in which caregivers are empowered to appreciate their own immense potential for positively influencing the life of a child. (Brooks, p. 509)